

South Central protests school closures

Robert D. Skeels reports on a public forum of teachers and families who want to turn back plans to close and reconstitute three South Central Los Angeles schools.

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LOS ANGELES--Students, parents, teachers and community activists came together on March 26 for a forum hosted by Unión del Barrio to discuss how to oppose school closures in South Central Los Angeles.

John C. Fremont High School is slated for reconstitution, and Ánimo Justice Charter High School and Menlo Adult School for closure.

The meeting began with a stirring introduction by social justice educator Jose Lara, who reminded everyone that what was happening at these three schools can happen at any school unless we begin to organize and fight back.

Joel Vaca, a mathematics teacher at Fremont High, discussed his school's long struggles with severe overcrowding, underfunding and a year-round calendar. He described how Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Superintendent Ramon Cortines walked into a meeting, announced the reconstitution and told all the teachers they would have to reapply for their jobs.

Reconstitution is one of No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) more punitive provisions for schools failing to reach the impossible targets NCLB sets--and requires the termination of the entire staff.

While there's ample evidence that school reconstitution does nothing but exacerbate the issues that cause schools to struggle in the first place, Cortines has been unwilling to budge. Vaca said that Fremont teachers all vowed not to reapply for their jobs as an act of resistance.

Mirna Rico, a Fremont High School parent and activist, said, "The district still hasn't notified us parents or the community. We heard about the reconstitution on the news. They've been stonewalling us, and it doesn't give us a chance to decide what to do."

School reconstitutions, like charter takeovers of public schools, are extremely disruptive to students and their families. Fremont representatives discussed the ongoing community efforts to save the school and invited people to go to their Web site savefremont.org [2].

FOLLOWING THE Fremont speakers were those from Ánimo Justice, which was recently slated to close at the end of the school year on the fiat declaration by Green Dot

Public Schools' CEO Marco Petruzzi and his unelected private board.

Earlier that day, students, parents, educators and activists marched from Ánimo Justice in South Central to Green Dot's headquarters in the elite Bunker Hill area of downtown Los Angeles. Along the roughly five-mile trip, marchers chanted and carried placards including one that said "¡Tenemos el Animo Pero No Justicia!" (We have the spirit, but no justice!)

These same activists had organized the [sit-ins and rallies at Ánimo Justice](#) [3] about a week before.

Marlon Silva, a junior at Ánimo Justice and one of the student leaders, described the march to Green Dot. He explained how Petruzzi told all the press to leave before agreeing to meet with students and parents.

"Green Dot's motto is parents and students have a voice and input," Silva said, "but when this decision was made, the only thing Green Dot cared about was money. It's a business behind a mask of a school."

Silva read a lengthy list of demands that were radical and inspiring. In the end, he said Green Dot needed to stop putting profits before students. In response, Petruzzi told the students, "We have no money. We're a nonprofit. We don't have a rich guy that gives us extra."

Petruzzi's last statement is perplexing, given the millions of dollars provided to Green Dot by billionaires and their foundations including Eli and Edythe Broad, the Walton Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates, Reed Hastings of Netflix and Donald Fisher of the Gap.

What's more puzzling is that Green Dot was recently vying to take over a portion of the newly built Esteban E. Torres High School through LAUSD Vice President Yolie Flores's woefully misnamed "Public School Choice" resolution. Fortunately, the school was awarded to a public school team headed by a collaboration of UTLA teachers and community members instead.

One speaker, who asked to remain anonymous because of their relationship with Green Dot, explained that Ánimo Justice was the only Green Dot school with sufficient English Language Learner and Special Education resources, and one of the few schools in that attendance boundary.

By all accounts, Ánimo Justice had been a grand experiment by the Charter Management Organizations to prove that they could serve similar populations to public schools, while still paying astronomical salaries to their executives and running schools in a heavy-handed, top-down fashion.

Ánimo Justice was supposed to serve as an argument against corporate charter critics who have shown charters are guilty of "skimming" and employ exclusionary methods to avoid educating every child. Sadly for Ánimo Justice families and the community, Green Dot supposedly serves, the experiment was failing and effecting Green Dot's profitability.

Coalition for Educational Justice's Frances Martin Turner summed up the situation best when she said, "Public schools don't have the option to say: 'We don't have enough money so close it down.'"

Social justice educator and Unión del Barrio member Jose Lara spoke on behalf of the Menlo Adult School. LAUSD recently announced it would close every Adult Education School, like Menlo, where it didn't own the property. Student leaders like Blanca Perez organized a 300-person protest at Menlo last month in response to the mendacity of LAUSD's Board President Monica Garcia.

Garcia had promised students that if Menlo's landlord lowered the cost of the lease, they would keep the school open. The landlord was willing to lower the lease by as much as 25 percent, but LAUSD still closed the school. Lara made a powerful speech about the importance of Adult Education Schools:

They are closing down the only places where students can return to complete high school. They are a critical resource for adults learning English as a second language, and for working people to finish their education.

All the speakers were able to tie the plight of their schools directly to the budget cuts and the underfunding of schools in general. UTLA teacher Sarah Knopp pointed out how the wealthy, politicians and the press are constantly trying to drive a wedge between teachers and families, because they know how hard it is for people to find jobs with health care and pensions these days.

This community forum showed that working people are tired of being lied to, stolen from and are ready to begin the much need struggle for justice and equality.

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What to listen to

To view comments from teachers and community activists, visit [Jose Lara's video blog](#) [4].

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[1] <http://socialistworker.org/departments/Activist-News>

[2] <http://savefremont.org/blogweb/index.php>

[3] <http://socialistworker.org/2010/03/26/charter-school-closing>

[4] <http://www.youtube.com/user/JoseLaraVideo>

[5] <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0>